



Social media, Marital Instability and Youth Perception of Marriage in Delta State

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate how social media impacts on the attitude of youths towards marriage. The study was essentially qualitative in nature, and employed a cross-sectional survey design involving 8 conveniently selected respondents from eight Universities in Delta State. The study situated its thesis in the Magic Bullet theory of media and communication. The theory contends that the symbols projected in media, including the social media, has an immediate and powerful influence on the thoughts and actions of a passive audience. Scholars of this school of thought agree that the public can be readily “influenced” by media communication the same way a patient being injected with a hypodermic needle can be. Whereas this theory has been widely criticized, it is seen here to be a suitable explanation for how the social media could be changing the attitude of youths towards marriage. In line with the arguments of this theory, the study showed that youths in the selected areas in Delta State perceived marriage as mostly unstable and a union of unhappy people. The survey also revealed that many youths agree that the marriage institution has today lost its relevance and may be contributing to social problems and challenges.

Keywords: Social media, Youth, Perception, Marriage, Magic bullet theory, Delta State

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage and family institutions as rightly noted by Amedie (2015); Little and McGivern (2014); and Oke (2004), are key structures in human societies as they form the basic social building blocks that connect otherwise different kinship groupings in society. These institutions are regarded as cultural universals, implying that they can be found in any human culture regardless of the fact that their composition and form frequently differ significantly. It is on the basis of this that Sociologists have regularly investigated the various factors that affect the stability and relevance of the institution of marriage as well as the institution of family. Marriage, for instance, is principally the institution that admits people into family life and allows for an approved relationship involving economic cooperation as well as normative sexual activities and child bearing. However, marital instability has become a source of concern in contemporary society. Today, the phenomena of separation, divorce, and broken homes have become a recurring concern around the globe. In Nigeria, it was reported by the Nigerian Tribune in 2016 that there were well over 30,000 recorded cases of dissolved marriages in just six States, namely: Lagos, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Imo, and Bayelsa. It is important to note that this statistics pale in comparison to recent data where many marriages have been noted to end even more abruptly. For example, recently a newspaper report showed that between January and March, a total of 4, 000 divorce applications were reportedly filed before various courts in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria. These and many other unreported cases of marital breakdown and divorces increase the concerns of social development scholars.

While marital stability presents a number of benefits to individuals and the society as a whole, scholars such as Abbasi (2018); Omorogiuwa and Omorogiuwa (2016); Bryfonski (2012); Stevenson and Wolfers (2007); Popenoe and Whitehead (2004) and Berger (2001), have noted that there are factors that decrease the likelihood of one's marriage being stable and successful, such as age at

marriage, level of education, childlessness, infertility, unmet social and economic deprivations. A large body of research by Härkönen (2013); Dallos and Draper (2012); and Stevenson and Wolfers (2007), have also investigated the proximate factors that may lead to marital instability. Härkönen (2013) posited that infidelity and domestic violence, alongside other psychological and relational problems such as lack of intimacy, low communication, and feelings of neglect, are key sources of marital instability. De Graaf and Kalmijn (2016), Dallos and Draper (2012), and Amato (2000), also observed that impotence of either of the spouses, poverty and economic problems, parental influence, lack of trust, and personal lapses often lead to marital instability. In a similar view, Ekpenyong and Ingiabuna (2017) argued that marriage naturally comes with a lot of stress, unpleasantness, failures, and successes; and these tendencies are able to disrupt the stability of the marriage.

In a recent study, Ehoro and Badey (2021) have also noted how social media contribute immensely to marital instability today as against other variables such as economic status, type of marriage, fertility, family background of spouses, and level of education. This thesis finds support in the studies by scholars such as Putri and Restya (2019), and McDaniel, Drouin, and Cravens (2017), who have also found that lately social media use by couples increase the likelihood of a marriage to fail. A recent survey from Boston University in 2020 has revealed that non-social network users were 11.4% happier in their marriages than couples who frequently used social media. Heavy users were 32% more likely to contemplate leaving their spouse. Another qualitative study by scholars in Harvard University in 2019 showed that 25% of married couples argued at least once a week on account of social media use, and 17% fought daily over something they found about their spouse online. Another 20% of the respondents reported that they fought with their spouses on Facebook-related issues, and nearly half said they secretly logged into their spouse's accounts to investigate infidelity. Beyond how social media impacts on the stability of marriages, the emerging concerns include how the perception of people are daily affected by the rates of marital failures in our society today and how social media content on marriages impact on youth attitude to marriage. Thus, the aim of this paper was to investigate how social media has affected the perception of youths on marriage in Delta State. This is based on the assumption that the recent increase in the presentation of marital failures and challenges on the social media impacts on the perception of youths and may be increasing instability in the marriage institution.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this work is the Magic Bullet Theory (MBT), also known as the Hypodermic Needle Theory. This communication theory asserts that the media (like a needle) injects its contents into the audience's mind, causing changes in the audience's behaviour and mentality toward the message (see Figure 1). The magic bullet theory is a linear communication theory which suggests that media messages are injected directly into the brains of a passive audience and has a lasting impact on their behaviour. The theory suggests that people receive not only the messages in the media, but their attitude and behaviour are also shaped by it in the same way.

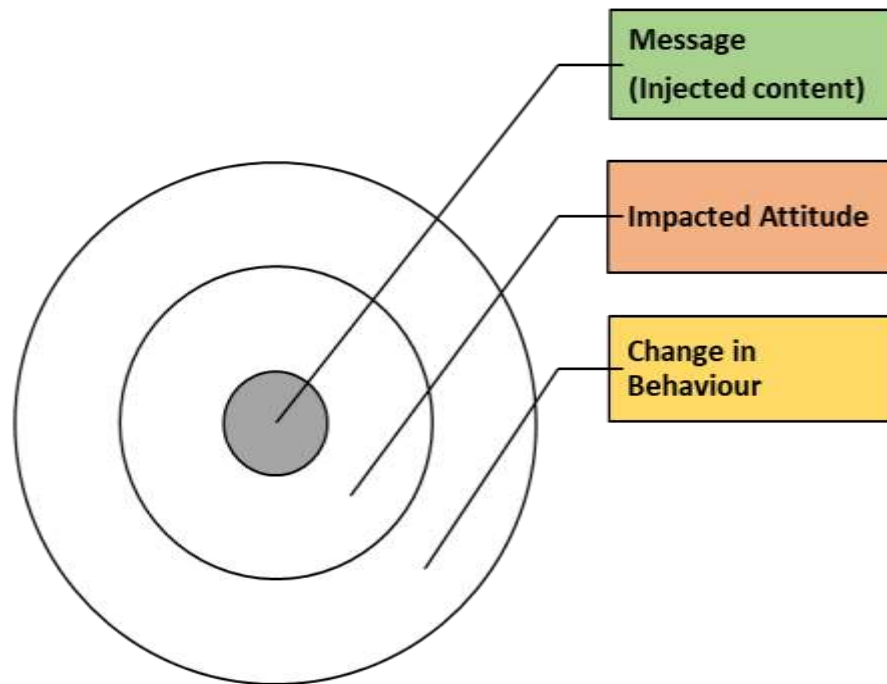


Figure 1: Magic bullet theory. Source: Authors' illustration (2021)

The theory was developed in the 1920s and 1930s after researchers observed the effects of media propaganda during World War I and other events such as the Orson Welles' War of the Worlds broadcast. As noted by Thibault (2016), the Magic Bullet Theory contends that the symbols projected in a media can have an immediate and powerful influence on the thoughts and actions of a passive audience. The model indicates that the public can be readily "influenced" or "misled" by comparing message communication to a patient being injected with serum. Whereas this approach to communication and media impact is no longer widely recognized and has been recently criticized for some of its limitations, the theory continues to shape discussions about media (Gangadharbatla & Valafar, 2017). Current research suggests that false news and misinformation on media has been seen to influence the behaviour and responses of mass audiences strongly. In this work, this theory was used to explain how media consumption of marital failures has a direct and powerful influence on audiences who are largely youths.

2.1 Social media and Changing Perceptions

Social media is an effective medium for connecting with others and sharing aspects of our lives. However, social media has been shown over and over again to impact social behaviour, necessitating the ongoing study of social media's effects on society. The obvious fact is that millions of people use social media platforms on a regular basis, and such apps have become an inseparable part of daily life. As such, there is no doubt about its potential and power to influence behaviour. Scholars have concluded that social media, like all other forms of media, has the ability to impact individual ideas, attitudes, and behaviours. For instance, McGuire (2013) explained that the effects of media can be understood in the following ways: the effect of advertising on purchasing, the effect of political campaigns on voting, the effect of public service announcements on personal behaviour and social improvement, the effect of propaganda on ideology, the effects of media ritual on social control and the most common ones, the effect of media violence on aggressive behaviour, the effect of erotic and sexual material on attitudes and objectionable behaviour. From this, one can see that social media has the power to influence individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour.

Results from different empirical studies have also provided converging evidence that information placed on social media affects social attitude, group tendency, and individual predisposition or conditioned response to social relationships. McGuire (2013) in a study on the persuasive tendencies of the social media have argued that the media were so powerful that they could inject their messages, like a "hypodermic needle", directly into the behaviour and attitude of users. For McGuire (2013),

social media influences how people perceive politics; impacts on how people perceive gender relations and gender roles; and sometimes negatively influence how people handle social relationships. Pearse (2008); Albarracin, Zanna, Johnson and Kumkale (2005); and Berger (2001), have also noted that media has two levels of effects, namely: Individual-level effect (that is, effect on an individual) and Macro-level effect (specifically effect on an aggregate, such as the public, institutions, society, or the media industries themselves). Pearse (2008) and Berger (2001) further noted that there are six types of media effects on individuals and the society. These six are: *cognition*, *beliefs*, *attitude*, *affect*, *physiology*, and *behaviour* and differ in terms of level of impact and individual experience and outcomes.

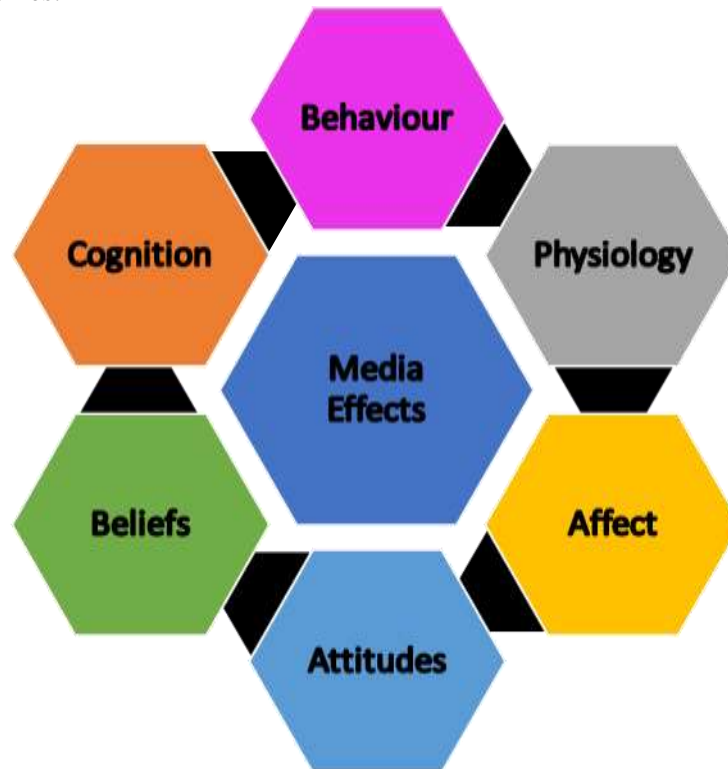


Figure 2: Media effects on humans. Source: Author's illustration (2021)

When media exposure changes a person's mental processes or the result of those mental processes, this is referred to as a *cognitive media effect*. The acquisition of accurate knowledge through media messages, notably books, newspapers, television news stories, and informational websites, is the easiest cognitive effect to document. This knowledge can be absorbed by the human mind through the process of memorizing. However, the human mind is capable of far more than simply memorizing; it is capable of transforming information into knowledge. This information translation can take the form of detecting patterns in media messages. The human mind may also group media messages in many ways to generate new meanings. It can generalize beyond media messages to generate principles about real life. All of these mental activities are cognitive effects on individuals.

Beliefs are cognitions concerning the likelihood that an object or event is linked with a specific attribute. Simply said, a belief is faith in something being real or true. The media constantly creates and shapes our beliefs by showing us more of the world than we can see for ourselves. For example, none of us have ever met George Washington, yet we all accept he existed and was one of the founding fathers of the United States of America because we have read about him in history books, visited websites on him, and watched movies about him. Each of us has views about the existence of numerous things that we have never personally witnessed in our lives; many of these beliefs have come from media messages. *Attitudes*, on the other hand, simply sum up our evaluations and judgments about the behaviour of a person or of something. People, for example, observe a character in a film and form opinions about his or her attractiveness, hero status, likeability, and so on. When the media presents tales about people, events, issues, and things in the real world, these stories frequently prompt us to form our own opinions regarding contentious subjects, political candidates,

advertised items, and others. While people's feelings are referred to as *affect*, and includes emotions and moods such as anger, disgust, fear, happiness, and sadness. The media can elicit strong emotions, particularly fear, lust, anger, and laughter. People can also use the media to control their moods. For example, when we are stressed out from all of our troubles in our actual life, we can relax by listening to music, forget our problems by watching television, or lose ourselves in the experience of playing games on the Internet.

However, a *physiological effect* is an automatic bodily response. The body response can be either purely automatic (such as pupil dilation, blood pressure, galvanic skin response) or quasi-automatic (heart rate, sexual responses). For example, when people watch an action/adventure movie, their heart rates and blood pressure typically increase. Their muscles tense and their palms sweat. They are experiencing a fight-or-flight response that has been hard wired into humans' brains. Threats trigger attention, and the body prepares itself to fight a predator or to flee. This fight-or-flight effect has enabled the human race to survive for thousands of years. *Behaviour*, on the other hand, is defined as the overt or evident actions of an individual. Media effects researchers have conducted a lot of studies in which they observe people's media exposure behaviours to see which media they use and how they use those media. Researchers also expose people to particular media messages, then observe their subsequent behaviours for things like aggression, use of advertised products, and debating of political issues.

2.2 *Impact of Social Media on Marital Stability*

The explosion of social media usage for communication, as characterized by the proliferation of social networking sites (SNS) and the exponential rise in users, is influencing how people relate today. While the public nature of SNS's makes it easier for individuals to share information, it has also been noted to be decreasing sociability that is important for establishing and maintaining the social capital. As noted by Aydin, Sari and Sahin (2018); Minkel (2012) and Bryfonski (2012), techno-distractions are at least one major factor in the disintegration of civic engagement, and as a result, in the quality and stability of social relationships today, including marriages. Current research, such as Aydin, Sari, and Şahin (2018); Amedie (2015); and Carter (2015), have also argued that social media impacts on the lifestyle of people and affects their relationship with others, levels of intimacy in a relationship, and perception towards marriage. As Gardner (2010) had noted in a paper titled "*The marriage killer: One in five American divorces now involve Facebook*", the common outcome is that the stability of marriages is affected. Gardner (2010) explained that social media has been implicated by many couples for contributing to the increase in marital instability. Hirschlag (2015); Lenhart and Duggan (2014) and Cravens (2013), in concurrence with this study, posited that social media has become really significant in divorce cases across the world. For Hirschlag (2015) and Lenhart and Duggan (2014), internet-enabled technology is affecting social relationships in a manner unprecedented in the world today.

In all, the stability of marital relationships, irrespective of its disruptive factors, has become interesting and momentous to sociologists and academics in development studies primarily because of its proximate and latent implications on individuals and the society as a whole. Scholars such as Arugu (2014), Carter (2015), and Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) have explored the influence of social media on marital relationships against this backdrop. For instance, Arugu's (2014) research entails a theoretical presentation of social indicators and the impact of marriage divorce in African societies. Aside from factors such as childlessness, adultery, quarrelling, alcoholism, socialization, financial difficulties, immaturity, mixed marriage, negative influence of in-laws, religious affiliation, and educational attainment, the study found that technological advancement, such as the introduction of social media, has a major impact on the stability of marriages in Africa. Carter in 2015 investigated how communicating through Facebook can be damaging to marriages, and how married as well as previously married persons perceive communication on Facebook with the opposite sex and how these interactions affect the stability of marriages. Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), on the other hand, investigated how the social media sometimes present alternatives for individuals in romantic relationships. What is manifest in all these studies is that social media impacts on mental health, on social relationships, disrupts marital relationships, and often times contributes to marital instability.

3. METHODS

This study is essentially qualitative in nature, and employed a cross-sectional survey design. This design was adopted mainly because of its appropriateness for the collection of data from a cross section of respondents who fit into the study criteria. The study conveniently selected 8 respondents from the eight Universities (Federal, State and Private) in Delta State namely: Delta State University, Abraka; Federal University of Petroleum resources, Effurun; Nigerian Maritime University, Okerenkoko; Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo; Michael & Cecilia Ibru University, Agbarha-Otor; Novena University, Ogume; Western Delta University, Oghara; and Admiralty University, Ibusa. The respondents were entirely youths between the ages of 18 and 34 years. For primary data, interview schedules designed by the researcher were used. In some cases, the respondents were contacted via telephone. However, secondary data for the study were sourced from documentaries, articles from peer-reviewed journals, biographies, newspapers, internet posts, and texts from related studies. Furthermore, data collected for the study were simply transcribed and presented verbatim.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Socio-demographic information of the respondents

Table 4.1 Information of the respondents

Variables	Categories	Freq	Percent
Gender	Male	4	50.0
	Female	4	50.0
Age	18 - 22	2	25.0
	23 - 27	1	12.5
	28 - 32	4	50.0
	33 - Above	1	12.5
	Marital Status	Single	5
Marital Status	Married	1	12.5
	Separated	1	12.5
	Divorced	1	12.5
	Religion	Christianity	4
Religion	Islam	3	37.5
	Others	1	12.5
	Occupation	Student	4
Occupation	Self-employed	1	12.5
	Private	1	12.5
	Public	2	25.0

NB: Percent may not total 100.0 owing to approx.

Source: Field survey (2021)

As shown in Table 4.1, the respondents consist of both males and females within the ages of 18 – 22 (25.0%), 23 – 27 (12.5%), 28 – 32 (50.0%), and 33 years & above (12.5%). Data on the marital status of the respondents revealed that only one of the respondents was married as at the time of the study; the remaining were single (62.5%), separated (12.5%) and divorced (12.5%). Also, majority of the respondents, that is 50.0%, were Christians; while 37.5% of the respondents were Muslims. The remaining 12.5% indicated that they were either atheists or practiced some ethnic religion. In addition, 50.0% of the respondents indicated that they were students at different undergraduate and postgraduate levels, 12.5% of the respondents indicated that they were self-employed, alongside another 12.5% who indicated that they worked in private firms. Only 25.0% of the respondents indicated that they work in public establishments in the State. These socio-demographic attributes make the selected respondents appropriate for this study, especially in terms of their age, gender distribution, educational levels, and marital status.

4.2 Presentation of data

The study raised a number of questions bordering on the relationship between social media, marital instability, and the attitude of youths towards marriage. First, the study examined respondents' perception of social media content on marriages.

4.2.1 Research question one:

What is your perception of marriage based on social media content?

From the responses of the study participants, it can be seen that youths do not believe in the stability of marriages considering the number of marital challenges posted online. For instance, some of the respondents indicated that:

"The truth is, many of us are scared of getting married today. This is because of the kind of things you hear about marriages especially on social media. Check it now. In fact, open Facebook or any blog right now you'll see it. Every day you hear of one dissolved marriage or the other. Even with people you can never believe will ever separate. I think few months ago we heard that Bill Gates and wife were separating? That is after over 20 years of marriage? It is scary" (Female, 24, Delta State University).

"I've come to understand that marriage is a very risky business. I belong to different singles and married groups on social media, and the regular stories you hear are that of cruelty, infidelity, and heart break. Me? It is a no no! Marriage is not for me, Abeg!" (Male, 31, Federal University of Petroleum Resources).

Some other participants also explained that marriage is not only unstable, it is also not entirely a union of happy people. For these participants, people only pretend in marriage.

"After I read a horrible story online about a woman was killed in domestic violence, my views about marriage changed. See, there is nothing like a happy and stable marriage. I can safely say that people are only pretending to be happy while managing their mistake of getting married" (Female, 29, Nigerian Maritime University).

"In the last few weeks, I have read over 30 stories about failed marriages online. Recently, up to 5 celebrities in the movie and music industry posted about their failed marriages. It is worrisome. You begin to wonder, where are the happy marriages? Marriages don't work. People only endure years of torture, pain, and slavery" (Female, 34, Edwin Clark University).

4.2.2 Research question two:

Considering the social media presentation of marriage, is marriage still a relevant social institution?

The study also examined the perception of the respondents on the relevance of marriage as a social institution. As revealed in the survey, whereas some of the respondents agree that marriage still plays an important role in the society, most of the respondents were of the opinion that marriage has lost its relevance. For instance, a respondent from Michael and Cecilia Ibru University, opined that

"Marriage is still very important o! It is relevant basically because it is the union that legalizes sexual relationships and child bearing. Also, without marriage how do families begin? So, I still believe in the institution of marriage. Our parents in earlier times had enduring marriages. Marriages that lasted and many of us grew up to see them live and care about each other" (Female, 27, Michael and Cecilia Ibru University).

Another participant noted that *"The functions of marriage in the society goes beyond helping two or more lovers come together in a socially approved union. Marriage brings satisfaction, comfort, prudence, and helps people become responsible as members of society"* (Male, 39, Novena University). However, the remaining respondents expressed different views. They opined that:

"Let's examine the key functions of marriage. Important among them are: companionship, child procreation, socialization, child upbringing, and social and economic cooperation. Now let me ask,

can't these things be done without marriage? People must not live together and suffering each other in the name of marriage. You can find companionship as much as you want. There are many baby-daddy's and baby mama's out there today living happily. So, what's the relevance of marriage? I will prefer people to have or enjoy each other's company and raise a family without coming into a union of trouble and endurance". (Female, 26, Western Delta University)

"When people talk about marital relationships and dream of how sweet and blissful it can be, I usually laugh at them. It is either they are lying to themselves or they don't know (sic). I have had my personal experiences and have also been involved in the marital problems of friends and family members. What I have discovered is that marriage is not very necessary. It is a place many wish to enter, but once they enter, they pray to come out of it. It is a scam that has been sold to us from generation to generation, and as you can see this new generation are losing it. Many cannot be caught in such relationship trap and pain anymore" (Male, 38, Admiralty University).

5. Summary

As shown in the data from the survey above, many youths believe that marriages are essentially not stable, and may not be very relevant to contemporary times considering the challenges associated with them. These findings are corroborated by the studies of scholars such as Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), Amedie (2015), and Arugu (2014) which have noted that social media, besides being a major source of marital instability, is also contributing to the changing perceptions about marital relationships, all of which further increase the chances of marital instability in the society. As argued by the Magic Bullet Theory, media content has a way of penetrating the minds and thoughts of its audience, and causes changes in attitude and behaviour. Many youths today are gradually losing faith in the institution of marriage and question the relevance. This manifests in the high rate of relationship problems today. Many are also not going into marriages anymore, rather they prefer cohabitation, open relationships, and other temporary relationship arrangements.

6. CONCLUSION

Social media, as shown in different studies, play an important role in the dissemination of information and enhancing social interaction. However, studies have also revealed that social media, like other media, can be a source of great influence on social behaviour. This study has revealed that social media has over the years affected the attitude of youths towards marriage. As shown in the survey, many youths, based on content about marriages on social media, believe that marriage is basically unstable and many spouses pretend to be happy in it. Furthermore, many youths believe strongly that marriage is not relevant in contemporary times. This raises a number of concerns as marriage is an important social institution that is formally charged with the responsibility of ensuring legitimacy, socio-economic cooperation, and the socialization of new members of the society in a stable and socially approved family.

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